

# RPG Reload File 102 – ‘Dragon Quest 3’

[April 27, 2017](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the regular feature where it was Earth all along. In each file, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it's doing in the modern day. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their place in the overall library, or simply to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow. As a distant descendant of Ortega, I choose the games that appear here, but if there's something you really want to see, don't be shy. You can offer up suggestions by posting in the comments below, by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#), or by heading on over to [the Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the TouchArcade forums. You might not see your suggestion soon, but it will be added to the master list for future consideration.

So, here's the thing. Back when *Dragon Quest 3* ([\\$9.99](#)) first hit the App Store in December of 2014, I wrote [a very thorough review](#) that also went through some of the game's history. It was almost **RPG Reload**-esque in that regard! If you haven't read it, I recommend doing so. Now, that's all well and good for a game of its prestige, but it does leave me with a bit less to write about than usual for an **RPG Reload File**. With that in mind, rather than doing a comprehensive history on the game like I usually do, I'm just going to briefly recap its origins and then try to explain why I think it's one of the greatest, most important JRPGs in the history of the hobby. No sweat, right?

The *Dragon Quest* series is largely responsible for popularizing the JRPG

genre as we know it. It's not without its own antecedents both inside the country of Japan and in the gaming world at large, but the original *Dragon Quest* ([\\$2.99](#)) is probably the earliest recognizable properly-formed game with the genre's common traits. It was a popular game, and so was its sequel, *Dragon Quest 2* ([\\$4.99](#)). But they were popular in the way that, say, *Excite Bike* or Namco's *Pro Baseball* games were. Certainly massive hits that had a lot of gamers talking, a lot of competitors hustling to make their own riffs, and a lot of magazines selling, but very much within the expected range both in sales and overall excitement. The writing was on the wall for the series in some ways, however. While the first game sold a respectable 1.5 million copies in Japan from its debut year of 1986, the sequel ended up the top-selling game released in 1987 with 2.4 million units sold. To paraphrase Disco Stu, if this trend continued, whoa.

*Dragon Quest 3* is where the series went from a big hit to a cultural phenomenon in Japan. Launching in February of 1988, *Dragon Quest 3* was hot in a way few games had ever been. People packed the streets on opening day to get their own copy, many skipping out on work or school to complete their mission. It's hard to separate truth from legend with all of the rumors that swirl around the game's launch, but there are stories about people being mugged for their copies (an exceptionally rare occurrence even in the busiest cities in Japan), offices that were supposed to be packed with workers appearing abandoned, and a whole lot of empty chairs in classrooms. A popular myth says that the truancy problem was so severe that the Japanese government made it a law that *Dragon Quest* games could no longer be released on weekdays. That isn't fully true, as it was more of a humorous suggestion than anything else, but it is true that Enix has released the new installments of the series on weekends ever since.

Ultimately, *Dragon Quest 3* would sell more than 3.8 million copies in Japan on the 8-bit Nintendo hardware. Only three other games sold more than 3 million copies in the region: *Super Mario Bros.*, *Super Mario Bros. 3*, and *Dragon Quest 4*. Even by today's standards, that would be a major success.

Of course, there was a problem then that still seems to persist. While the game was explosively popular in its home region, it sold relatively little outside of it. In fact, *Dragon Quest 3* wouldn't see an English release until three years after its Japanese launch, and it sold about as well as you would expect a 1988 8-bit game to sell in a 1991 market on the cusp of the 16-bit era. It's understandable, though very unfortunate. So what made this game take off in Japan in a way few other games could match?

The original *Dragon Quest* was a revolutionary work. It seems painfully rudimentary by today's standards, and like most pioneering works, it's full of rough edges that even the most generous of remakes couldn't fully smooth out. *Dragon Quest 2* expanded its horizons in some very ambitious ways, and to its credit, it got a lot right. With *Dragon Quest 3* selling one million copies on day one, a lot of that had to be riding on the good reputation of the second game. As for the nearly three million copies after that, well, *Dragon Quest 3* is a really great game that advanced the genre in meaningful ways without losing the accessibility that sat at the core of *Dragon Quest's* success.

One of creator Yuji Horii's goals with *Dragon Quest* was to make the RPG genre accessible to console players, and to that end he had deliberately simplified just about everything in the original game. So while it was clearly inspired by games like *Wizardry* or *Ultima*, many of the deeper elements of those series were stripped away. It could be argued that many of the advancements in the first couple of sequels largely involved Horii re-adding some of these discarded elements in appropriate doses. The second game allowed the player to control up to three party members, expanded the size of the world, introduced sea travel, and supported battles with multiple monsters at once. The game was a good 50% longer than the original, and there were more attempts at world-building and story-telling.

The biggest gameplay concept brought into *Dragon Quest 3* was the ability to choose job classes for your party members. In the previous game, you

were stuck with the three characters the game gave you, but now you could create your own party of four members, with only the hero's job fixed. That introduced a great deal of variety and replay value to the game, since you could always challenge yourself to a different party set-up on subsequent attempts. But the game went one step further, allowing players to change job classes once a certain point in the story had been reached. Re-classed characters would go back to level 1, but they could keep many of the abilities and stat boosts earned in their previous job. The magic system also saw some expansions, adding more buffs and debuffs to increase the number of strategic options open to players.

But the expanded mechanics are only part of what makes *Dragon Quest 3* so good. It wasn't enough that you could get all dressed up if you didn't have anywhere interesting to go, after all. Fortunately, the game really came through with its overall quest design. I'll be going into some spoilers for the rest of this article, so be warned. Right from the beginning, you're given a major goal, and it's not so different from that of the original game. You've come of age and the king wants you to defeat the evil fiend Baramos. As an added incentive, you want to find out what happened to your father, the legendary hero Ortega, who was last seen battling the dastardly overlord. It's a nice, personal thing that is just vague enough that the game can leave it simmering in the background while using it as impetus for the player to search everywhere for clues. The game uses some clever invisible rails to keep you on the right track early on, allowing you to come to grips with the various systems and the basic loop.

The story tosses out bread crumbs about Ortega now and then, but as you're looking around, various other mysteries are sure to catch your eye. How do you unlock these doors that block your way in certain places? You'll soon come into possession of a ship, and from there, the game really opens up. If you're a clever beaver, you'll spot a suspicious location that you can't get to by ship. Clues suggest that you'll need to collect six orbs to open the way forward. Each of these orbs is found in a different location and requires

you to complete some sort of task or mini-scenario to recover. The game won't explicitly tell you where you need to go, though. You need to explore and find things on your own. There are other things you'll want to find on the map, as well. This sudden lack of linearity can be paralyzing for some players, but it really is an amazing amount of freedom. It's not nearly as tricky to find the things you need as it was in *Dragon Quest 2*, either. One helpful point, if you notice it anyway, is that the game's map is basically similar to that of Earth.

Gathering the orbs is a long and arduous task, but the reward is worth it. While collecting all of the required items in *Dragon Quest 2* merely opened the way forward in a very direct sort of way, *Dragon Quest 3* gives you a fantastic prize. When brought together in the right place, the orbs awaken Lamia, a legendary bird that will carry you anywhere you want to go on her back. If you thought you had had freedom before, you hadn't seen anything yet. Lamia allows you to finally reach the stronghold of Baramos. A quick look at the clock might tell you that the game has run on longer than *Dragon Quest 2*, and so you might surmise that this is the end. Indeed, it seems so, but just as everyone is celebrating your victory, the true evil is revealed. The only way to vanquish the wicked Zoma and save everyone is to head into his world. Yes, the game has an entire second world.

If you've been playing the series so far, this is where things really start to pay off. This so-called Dark World is Alefgard, the location found in the previous two games. Zoma's Castle sits right in the location of Charlock where the Dragonlord set up shop in the first game. It's here that you'll discover the fate of your father, and it's here where your quest to save the world will end. Defeat Zoma and everything finally comes together. The Dark World of Alefgard is sealed off from the original world, and you are granted a new name in honor of your victory: Erdrick. The credits roll, and the whole thing ends off with a message that the story is "to be continued in *Dragon Quest 1*". Wow. By the time you've struggled your way through all of this, you'll probably have spent twice as much time as you did in the second game,

seen far more towns, NPCs, and conquered considerably more dungeons. But that ending makes it all worth it. The legendary hero referred to so frequently in the first two *Dragon Quest* games is the very hero you've spent this whole time playing as.

The funny thing is, it would have been easy for that plot beat to go unearned. But by the end of *Dragon Quest 3*, you've helped so many people, touched so many lives, and done so much, it's completely believable that you would be remembered as a legend. Horii didn't go halfway with it, either. All of those important items you need to recover in the first game, things that are said to have been used by Erdrick so long ago, are in fact the tools your hero uses to reach Zoma. You'll visit the same towns Erdrick was said to have passed through, and leave behind all of the relics that tie the continuity together. It also explains why Erdrick was seen as the start of his family line. You literally drop out of the sky into this strange world. Nobody knows you. Somehow you save the world from the oppressive evil that had been choking it. Sadly, history seems to forget about your companions. Ah well, you paid their bar tabs, what more do they want?

One of the strengths of the game is that you're doing so many things outside of the box along the way. You have a chance to take over as a king. You can gamble on monster fights at an arena. You'll help establish a colony and watch it grow. There's a ghost ship you need to find somewhere on the ocean. A pyramid sits full of treasure, but if you try to go for the really good stuff, you'll have to deal with some nasty curses. And hey, just what is going on with that Princess Himiko in Zipangu? There's a bit of an adventure game aspect to solving all of the quests in this game, and that's somewhat rare in this sub-genre, particularly in these early stages. But this diversity of gameplay and problem-solving is important, because it keeps the game from getting dull. The non-linear nature of the game's rather lengthy middle section also serves to give the player options if they can't puzzle something out. There are a lot of things to fix, so you can always move on to the next problem while you think of other solutions.

It's a habit of mine to replay at least the first three *Dragon Quest* games every year. To tell the truth, sometimes the first two feel like a bit of a slog, but it's all worth it when I get to *Dragon Quest 3*. I can try out different party set-ups, do things in a different order, and just enjoy that wonderful pay-off to the trilogy again and again. The iOS version of the game is fairly solid, and certainly the most convenient to play. It's not the best, sadly, but as with *Final Fantasy 6*, you have to pick your poison here. The Super Famicom version is great all-around and serves as the basis for this iOS port, but the Game Boy Color version has some interesting added content that none of the other versions have.

Of course, the presentation of the Game Boy Color version isn't that hot compared to the Super Famicom and mobile versions, and its English translation has to deal with the Game Boy's small screen resolution and small text boxes. The Super Famicom version itself is not officially available in English, which makes it a non-starter for a lot of players. The original NES version has its charms, but is obviously missing out on improvements and added content from later remakes. In light of all of this, the mobile version is as good a choice as any. Due to the extreme popularity of the series in Japan, I expect the game to be maintained for a long time to come, too. However you play it, just make sure that you do play it at some point. *Dragon Quest 3* is a really special game, and I think it's one of the rare lengthy JRPGs that doesn't feel overly padded in places.

That's just my take on *Dragon Quest 3*, though. What do you all think? You know the routine, friends. Leave your comments below, post in [the Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#) with your thoughts. As for me, I'll be back next week with the next **RPG Reload Play-Along**. I know, technically the new month starts on Monday, but I can't help that our first **Reload** of the month is on May the Fourth. Be with me next week as I announce the game in question for our **May Play-Along**! Thanks for reading!

**Next Week's Reload:** *The May RPG Reload Play-Along*